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Echoes of 1991

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The 2003 State of the Union address was given by a president preoccupied with the imminence of war. It is only in the context of George Bush's unmistakable intent to "disarm" -- by which he means "dislodge" -- Iraq's Saddam Hussein that the annual message to Congress makes sense.

Like a composer who introduces the theme of his finale in the opening bars, Bush in the first 30 seconds signaled his worldwide audience to be "aware of decisive days that lie ahead." He wandered the byways of domestic policy for the next half-hour, but made no effort to convince anyone that anything "decisive" would occur on Capitol Hill or even that he felt any personal urgency about such things as his "Healthy Forests Initiative."

Politically, Bush is required to act as if he cares about the gamut of issues from abortion to wildfires. The economy is a real concern to his political advisers; it defeated his father. But the remarkable thing is that the son has almost conceded to the Democrats the common-sense and popular positions on the economy. Washington Gov. Gary Locke, delivering the Democratic response, had all the easy points to make: Focus tax cuts on the middle-class, not the rich; help the state and local governments finance urgent needs; provide prescription drugs for all the elderly; and avoid long-term tax cuts that feed escalating deficits and threaten Social Security.

Polls show the Democrats on the winning side on all those issues. But that is not what worries Bush. His mind is fixed on the imminent showdown with Saddam Hussein. Bush has convinced himself that the man is a menace and must be removed. He persuaded Congress last year to grant him authority to do that. He would like the sanction of the U.N. Security Council, but his unmistakable message is that the United States will act, with whatever other nations are prepared to join, to remove the Iraqi dictator. "Trusting in the sanity and restraint of Saddam Hussein is not a strategy," Bush said in a tone of icy determination, "and it is not an option."

The deployments in the Persian Gulf point to a start of hostilities within six weeks. When his father delivered his State of the Union address on Jan. 29, 1991, the U.S.-led coalition had been pounding Iraq with bombs and missiles for 13 days. The ground offensive that liberated Kuwait and sent Hussein's army into panicky retreat was still five weeks away. The ground war lasted only a few days. The hope is that this coming war will be equally swift. But rereading the elder Bush's 1991 State of the Union also conveys a cautionary message.

He spoke then as head of an international coalition, forged by 12 U.N. resolutions "and backed up by forces from 28 countries of six continents." "With few exceptions," the elder Bush was able to say, "the world now stands as one." He cited the nations that were engaged with us in that war, a reminder of the compelling case the United States had made for repelling Iraq's aggression: "The courage and success of the RAF pilots, of the Kuwaiti, Saudi, French, the Canadians, the Italians, the pilots of Qatar and Bahrain -- all are proof that for the first time since World War II, the international community is united. The leadership of the United Nations . . . is now confirming its founders' vision."

The father, no less than the son, had taken the measure of Saddam Hussein. "Most Americans know

instinctively why we are in the gulf," the elder Bush said. "They know we had to stop Saddam now, not later. They know that this brutal dictator will do anything, will use any weapon, will commit any outrage, no matter how many innocents suffer. They know we must make sure that control of the world's oil resources does not fall into his hands, only to finance further aggression."

One more caution flag is raised by rereading that 1991 address. "We will succeed in the gulf," the first George Bush said. "And when we do, the world community will have sent an enduring warning to any dictator or despot . . . who contemplates outlaw aggression."

The "enduring warning" did not endure. Twelve years later we are back in the gulf, facing imminent war. And with far fewer allies this time.

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